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# Humanistic psychology

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**Humanistic psychology** is a psychological perspective which rose to prominence in the mid-20th century, drawing on the work of early pioneers like Carl Rogers and the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology. It adopts a holistic approach to human existence through investigations of meaning, values, freedom, tragedy, personal responsibility, human potential, spirituality, and self-actualization.<sup>[1] [2]</sup>

## Conceptual origins

The humanistic approach has its roots in phenomenological and existentialist thought<sup>[3]</sup> (see Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre). Eastern philosophy and psychology also play a central role in humanistic psychology, as well as Judao-Christian philosophies of personalism, as each shares similar concerns about the nature of human existence and consciousness.<sup>[2]</sup> (For further information on influential figures in personalism, see: Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, Denis de Rougemont, Jacques Maritain, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyła, Borden Parker Browne, George H. Howison, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Peter A. Bertocci, W. Gordon Allport, and Martin Luther King, Jr.)

It is also sometimes understood within the context of the three different forces of psychology: behaviorism, psychoanalysis and humanism. Behaviorism grew out of Ivan Pavlov's work with the conditioned reflex, and laid the foundations for academic psychology in the United States associated with the names of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. This school was later called the science of behavior. Abraham Maslow later gave behaviorism the name "the second force". The "first force" came out of Freud's research of psychoanalysis, and the psychologies of Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, Harry Stack Sullivan, and others. These theorists and practitioners, although basing their observations on extensive clinical data, primarily focused on the depth or "unconscious" aspects of human existence<sup>[4]</sup>

In the late 1950s, psychologists concerned with advancing a more holistic vision of psychology convened two meetings in Detroit, Michigan. These psychologists, including Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Clark Moustakas, were interested in founding a professional association dedicated to a psychology that focused on uniquely human issues, such as the self, self-actualization, health, hope, love, creativity, nature, being, becoming, individuality, and meaning—that is, a concrete understanding of human existence.

## Development of the field

These preliminary meetings eventually led to other developments, which culminated in the description of humanistic psychology as a recognizable "third force" in psychology (along with behaviorism and psychoanalysis). Significant developments included the formation of the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in 1961 and the launch of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (originally "The Phoenix") in 1961.

Subsequently, graduate programs in Humanistic Psychology at institutions of higher learning grew in number and enrollment. In 1971, humanistic psychology as a field was recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA) and granted its own division (Division 32) within the APA. Division 32 publishes its own academic journal called *The Humanistic Psychologist*.<sup>[2]</sup>

The major theorists considered to have prepared the ground for Humanistic Psychology are Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Rollo May. Maslow was heavily influenced by Kurt Goldstein during their years together at Brandeis University. Psychoanalytic writers also influenced humanistic psychology. Maslow himself famously acknowledged his "indebtedness to Freud" in *Towards a Psychology of Being*.<sup>[5]</sup> Other psychoanalytic influences include the work of Wilhelm Reich, who discussed an essentially 'good', healthy core self and *Character Analysis* (1933), and Carl Gustav Jung's mythological and archetypal emphasis. Other noteworthy inspirations for and leaders of the movement include Roberto Assagioli, Gordon Allport, Medard Boss, Martin Buber (close to Jacob L. Moreno), James Bugental,

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Victor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Hans-Werner Gessmann, Amedeo Giorgi, Kurt Goldstein, Sidney Jourard, R. D. Laing, Clark Moustakas, Lewis Mumford, Fritz Perls, Anthony Sutich, Thomas Szasz, Kirk J. Schneider, and Ken Wilber.<sup>[2] [6]</sup>

A human science view is not opposed to quantitative methods, but, following Edmund Husserl: 1) favors letting the methods be derived from the subject matter and not uncritically adopting the methods of natural science,<sup>[7]</sup> and 2) advocates for methodological pluralism. Consequently, much of the subject matter of psychology lends itself to qualitative approaches (e.g., the lived experience of grief), and quantitative methods are mainly appropriate when something can be counted without leveling the phenomena (e.g., the length of time spent crying).

## Counseling and therapy

Humanistic psychology includes several approaches to counseling and therapy. Among the earliest approaches we find the developmental theory of Abraham Maslow, emphasizing a hierarchy of needs and motivations; the existential psychology of Rollo May acknowledging human choice and the tragic aspects of human existence; and the person-centered or client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, which is centered on the clients' capacity for self-direction and understanding of his/her own development.<sup>[8]</sup>

Other approaches to humanistic counseling and therapy include Gestalt therapy, humanistic psychotherapy, depth therapy, holistic health, encounter groups, sensitivity training, marital and family therapies, body work, and the existential psychotherapy of Medard Boss.<sup>[2]</sup> Existential-integrative psychotherapy, developed by Kirk Schneider (2008), is a relatively new development within humanistic and existential therapy.

Self-help is also included in humanistic psychology: Sheila Ernst and Lucy Goodison have described using some of the main humanistic approaches in self-help groups.<sup>[9]</sup> Co-counseling, which is a purely self-help approach, is regarded as coming within humanistic psychology (see John Rowan's *Guide to Humanistic Psychology* <sup>[10]</sup>). Humanistic theory has had a strong influence on other forms of popular therapy, including Harvey Jackins' Re-evaluation Counselling and the work of Carl Rogers.

Humanistic psychology tends to look beyond the medical model of psychology in order to open up a nonpathologizing view of the person.<sup>[8]</sup> This usually implies that the therapist downplays the pathological aspects of a person's life in favour of the healthy aspects. A key ingredient in this approach is the meeting between therapist and client and the possibilities for dialogue. The aim of much humanistic therapy is to help the client approach a stronger and more healthy sense of self, also called self-actualization.<sup>[2] [8]</sup> All this is part of humanistic psychology's motivation to be a science of human experience, focusing on the actual lived experience of persons.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Humanistic psychology and social issues

Although social transformation may not have been the primary focus in the past, a large percentage of contemporary humanistic psychologists currently investigate pressing social, cultural, and gender issues.<sup>[11]</sup> Even the earliest writers who were associated with and inspired psychological humanism<sup>[2]</sup> explored topics as diverse as the political nature of "normal" and everyday experience (RD Laing), the disintegration of the capacity to love in modern consumerist society (Erich Fromm),<sup>[12]</sup> the growing technological dominance over human life (Medard Boss), and the question of evil (Rollo May-Carl Rogers debate). In addition, Maureen O'Hara, who worked with both Carl Rogers and Paolo Freire, has pointed to a convergence between the two thinkers given their distinct but mutually related focus on developing critical consciousness of situations which oppress and dehumanize.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Criticism

Critics of the field point out that it tends to ignore social change research. Isaac Prilleltensky, a self-described radical who champions community and feminist psychology, has argued for years that humanistic psychology inadvertently contributes to systemic injustice.<sup>[14]</sup>

Further, it has been argued that the early incarnations of humanistic psychology lacked a cumulative empirical base,<sup>[15]</sup> and the architects of the movement endorsed an "unembarrassed denial of human reciprocity and community."<sup>[16]</sup> However, according to contemporary humanistic thinkers, humanistic psychology need not be understood to promote such ideas as narcissism, egotism, or selfishness.<sup>[17]</sup>

The association of humanistic discourse with narcissistic and overly optimistic worldviews is a misreading of humanistic theory. In their response to Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Bohart and Greening (2001) note that along with pieces on self-actualization and individual fulfillment, humanistic psychologists have also published papers on a wide range of social issues and topics, such as the promotion of international peace and understanding, awareness of the holocaust, the reduction of violence, and the promotion of social welfare and justice for all.<sup>[17]</sup>

Criticisms that humanistic psychology lacks an "empirical base" have tended to rely on allegedly "restricted views" of what constitutes "empirical," an uncritical adoption of natural science methods (as opposed to human science methods), and an outright neglect of Rogers' own empirical work.<sup>[18]</sup> To the contrary, humanistic psychology has a long history of empirical research,<sup>[19]</sup> including but not limited to the work of Maslow, Amedeo Giorgi and David Elkins.<sup>[20]</sup> In fact, humanistic psychology research traces its origins all the way back to American psychology pioneer William James' masterpiece, "Varieties of Religious Experience"<sup>[19]</sup>

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## External links

- Association for Humanistic Psychology (<http://www.ahpweb.org>)
- Society for Humanistic Psychology, Division 32 of the American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org/divisions/div32/>)

## Further reading

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